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Hawaiian Music Star, Maker of Hybrid Hits, Seeks a Bigger Stage Beyond Waikiki

By NATE CHINEN

HONOLULU — Henry Kapono spends most Sunday afternoons here, on the beachfront patio of Duke’s Waikiki restaurant at the Outrigger Waikiki hotel. His standing engagement has become something of an island institution over the years. It’s a bar gig, maybe not what you might expect from a Hawaiian music veteran of Mr. Kapono’s stature. But he throws himself into it nonetheless, routinely playing for two hours without a break, to stoke the fires of a dancing-and-drinking crowd.

During one recent show a catamaran bobbed in the surf behind Mr. Kapono as he segued from “I Can See Clearly Now,” the reggae war horse by Johnny Nash, to “Every Day in the Islands,” one of his own hybrid Jawaiian (a mixture of Jamaican and Hawaiian) tunes. His four-piece band was crisp. The festive scene was typical, and true to the image Mr. Kapono paints in a song called “Duke’s on Sunday,” which Jimmy Buffett borrowed as a closer for his last album.

But you won’t find Mr. Kapono at Duke’s on Feb. 11, because he’ll be in Los Angeles for the 49th Grammy Awards. He is among the nominees for best Hawaiian music album, for “The Wild Hawaiian” (Eclectic), which somehow represents both the most traditional and the most radical work of his career. Whether you regard him as a front-runner or as a long shot depends partly on your definition of Hawaiian music, a controversial issue ever since the category was established a few years ago.

“The Wild Hawaiian” is a Hawaiian rock album. More specifically, it’s an album of songs in the Hawaiian language, against a whiplash of percussion and distorted guitars. At times, its sound suggests Jimi Hendrix or Carlos Santana, artists Mr. Kapono often covers at his Sunday gig. Lyrically, it reaches further back: in some cases, to venerable Hawaiian chants. Not surprisingly, its release last year caused a bit of a stir.

“The Hawaiians were taken aback when they first heard it,” said Alaka’i Paleka, the program director and morning host of KPOA (93.5 FM), a Maui radio station that has three tracks from the album in rotation. “It was rocking some songs that weren’t rocked before. The response — it was shock.” Using the Hawaiian term for elder, she continued, “Some of the kupunas were not happy with the style.”

Over lunch at Duke’s with his wife and manager, Lezlee Ka’aihue, and their 6-month-old twins, Mr. Kapono, 58, described the album in less controversial terms: as a cultural outreach and the result of personal introspection.

“My mom and dad spoke fluent Hawaiian; they were both pure Hawaiians,” he said, recalling his upbringing as Henry Ka’aihue. (Kapono is his middle name.) “But they would never speak it to us. When they were growing up, they were forbidden to speak the language, and punished for it. So they never taught us the language. That was the case for my generation.”

Mr. Kapono is a product of the 1960s, though it was in the ’70s that his career took flight, when he teamed up with Cecilio Rodriguez, a fellow guitarist and singer. As Cecilio and Kapono, the duo made a string of breezy acoustic pop albums that resonated deeply at home and beyond, though perhaps not as well nationally as

Columbia Records would have liked. (“They didn’t know what to do with C & K,” Mr. Kapono said of the label. “We were two brown-skinned guys with long hair singing contemporary music.”)

Cecilio and Kapono were Hawaii’s answer to Simon and Garfunkel, though it’s important to note that they too sang in English. Many of the duo’s best-loved songs — originals like “Friends” and “Sailing,” as well as covers like “All in Love Is Fair,” by Stevie Wonder — qualify as Hawaiian music only on a technicality. But for several generations of listeners, those songs embody the sound of Hawaii, at least in part.

After the breakup of C & K in the early 1980s, Mr. Kapono embarked on a successful solo career. About a decade ago he set out to make his first Hawaiian-language album, using traditional instrumentation. “I did a recording,” he said, “and when I listened back, it was missing something. It just didn’t have that power.”

He shelved the idea to focus on other projects, including Kapono’s, a restaurant and club that opened in 2001 and closed early last year. Along the way, he began playing the electric guitar for the first time since high school, and something clicked.

Motivated by the desire to carry Hawaiian culture to a new generation, Mr. Kapono conceived of “The Wild Hawaiian.” The risk of being misunderstood was clear.

“This is something so new and so different that if there’s any repercussions, the only guy they’re going to point to is me,” he said. “So I put a lot of thought into doing this. I’m real proud of it. It’s made me really learn more about myself as a Hawaiian and as a human being.”

Asked to elaborate, he pointed to lessons inherent in the songs: “Na Ali’i,” the chant that opens the album, preaches respect, while “He’eia,” another chant, conveys passion. The rest of the songs have given attributes, right up through “Ke Aloha O Ka Haku,” a song of prayerful forbearance that Queen Lili’uokalani composed in 1895 while she was imprisoned at Iolani Palace after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy.

“Once I got to that point,” Mr. Kapono said, “I realized that this whole album is about moving forward.”

Of course moving forward means different things to different people, Grammy voters included. When the Hawaiian music category was introduced in 2005, after more than a decade of intense lobbying by local factions, the nominee list included legends like the Brothers Cazimero and Keali’i Reichel, both perennial favorites at the Na Hoku Hanohano Awards, Hawaii’s version of the Grammys.

But the 2005 Grammy went to “Slack Key Guitar Volume 2” (Palm), a compilation devoted to the acoustic style with nonstandard guitar tuning that originated in the islands. It was a safe, bland choice, and it set a precedent. In 2006 four of the five nominees were slack key albums; this year three such albums are in the running, along with “The Wild Hawaiian” and a strong traditional offering by the singer Amy Hanaiali’i.

If Mr. Kapono wins, it will signal a reconsideration of what constitutes authenticity in Hawaiian music. Not because he plugged in — the electric guitar has its origins in Hawaiian music, after all — but because he cross-pollinated cultures with such panache.

The album has been noticed for that very reason, just as Mr. Kapono had hoped. On Saturday, before he heads to Los Angeles, he is scheduled to perform “Na Ali’i” on the Pro Bowl halftime show, which has been given the theme of “Wild Hawaii.” The production will include pyrotechnics, about 200 hula dancers and more than 750 contemporary dancers. (Cheyenne, the namesake star of an MTV reality show, will also perform.)

“I know what it is,” Mr. Kapono said of his Hawaiian heritage. “I know how rich it is, I know how beautiful it is. So that’s what I want to take forward. And the generations to come, I want them to take that forward. I

want them to dream. I want them to have hopes. That's how we build a foundation for new things.”

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